



Thinking Collections: Telling Tales: A Survey Exhibition of Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective

by Osman Can Yerebakan

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The first floor gallery at Mana Contemporary in Jersey City has been transformed into a cozy Kazakhstani tea room. Low tables adorned with lavish tea cups are placed amidst colorful, haphazardly patterned cushions which are scattered on the floor. But the suggestion of relaxation is interrupted by the violent sounds coming from the black and white scenes projected on the walls. Entitled *Steppen Wolf* (2017), the four-minute video by Said Atabekov, follows two groups of Kazakhstani men playing the ancient nomadic game, kokpar. Cramped bodies of men and horses, shot from a bird's eye view, create a hallucinatory effect, a medley of skin, blood and earth. Kokpar is a blood-drenched form of polo played on horseback between two teams, where the headless body of a goat is used in place of a ball. The game's sole incentive is to bring the headless goat carcass, which must weigh 66 pounds, over the goal line. The deafening sound and image of bodies rushing towards the goat's heads contradict the room's soothing ambience. The piece is a statement on cultural difference and play. Replace the tea room with an American living room similarly designed for comfort and it is clear, the use of a headless carcass of a goat is really no more grotesque than the pigskin football, which is bandied about in the notoriously brutal game of American football.



Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, *Focus Kazakhstan: Thinking Collections: Telling Tales*, Mana Contemporary, 2018. ACAW Signature Exhibition. Courtesy Asia Contemporary Art Week & The National Museum of Kazakhstan. Photo: Michael Wilson.

Thinking Collections: Telling Tales is the first U.S. survey dedicated to the Kazakh art collective Kyzyl Tractor. Kyzyl Tractor is an avant-garde art collective established in the mid '90s in the wake of the liberating reformations of Perestroika. They are not based in the Kazakhstan capital of Astana, or Almaty, the former Soviet capital and the largest city of Kazakhstan, but rather are nomadic. The collective—composed of Moldakul Narymbetov, Smail Bayaliyev, Said Atabekov, Vitaliy Simakov and Arystanbek Shalbayev—adopted their name, which means red tractor, to signal mobility and departure from preceding cultural or artistic limitations.

The exhibition is part of a four-venue project, titled *Focus Kazakhstan*, which represents the country's artistic trajectory over the last few decades with exhibitions in London, Berlin, Suwon, and, here, Jersey City. "They recognize the force of power not only within man, but also without," states Leeza Ahmady, exhibition curator and director of the project's co-organizer Asia Contemporary Art Week. "Their approach to [the] human condition is to think in a microcosmical manner. They remind us that each region feeds one another. The idea that the truth is not heads or tails, but heads and tails is important." Taking cues from local oral traditions, folklore, and other influential belief systems in the region, the group uses its nomadic traditions to question western notions of exhibition and art history. Through ritualistic happenings, they use familiar and organic materials such as leather, wood, or animal skin, which are utilitarian tools as much as materials for nomadic cultures. They present the objects devoid of utilitarian purposes, elevating their textural and narrative reality. Unlike a "readymade," their presentation of the object does not comment on what constitutes an artwork because they are not interested in claiming the unexpected as art rather they seek what is outside the realm of western notions of art to take us elsewhere.

Kyzyl Tractor's adoption of nomadic traditions and organic materials allows them to work independently from systems of urban production. As an anonymous collective based in Central Asia—a territory still somewhat of a mystery for the mainstream art world—they challenge the definitions of locality, familiarity, and foreignness. As they shift between mediums, sites, and, most importantly, audiences, Kyzyl Tractor is ultimately "anti-city," according to Sludskiy. Theirs is a language developed to explore art without the city.

Ahmady's "heads and tails" metaphor was evident during the exhibition opening, during which the group re-staged a two-decade-old performance, entitled *Purification*. Rolling a larger-than-life drum from the front yard into the building, they burnt sage and sprinkled water in order to purify the space from negative energy. Once they started playing the enormous drum in front of a cellphone-ready crowd, they enacted an earth-shattering version of reality, in which the serenity against chaos and the natural against manmade intertwined. Between the sterile walls of the art space, the beating of the gigantic drum, accompanied by the performers' vocalizations, produced an alarming noise. The performance manifested their defiance of cultural distinctions between the everyday and the spiritual or the familiar and the foreign. In this case, they seemed to ask, "Foreign for whom?"



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